NINE CHARACTERISTICS OF
HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

RESEARCH FINDINGS

OSPI reviewed 20 recent research studies that have examined the common characteristics of high performing schools. Some of the studies were reviews of other research that has taken place over many year on the same topic, while others examined these schools in specific settings and locations, such as high performing elementary schools in a large urban setting. This body of research represents findings from both Washington state and around the nation.

The content of each study was analyzed to determine what characteristics were found most often among high performing schools. Performance was usually measured in terms of high or dramatically improving scores on standardized tests, often in difficult circumstances such as high levels of poverty. In every case, there was no single factor that accounted for the success or improvement. Instead, the research found that high performing schools tend to have a combination of common characteristics. Some reports found as few as five characteristics, while others found many more. OSPI's analysis of these characteristics narrowed these lists into nine areas. These schools have:

1. A clear and shared focus.

2. High standards and expectations for all students.

3. Effective school leadership.

4. High levels of collaboration and communication.

5. Curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards.

6. Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching.

7. Focused professional development.

8. A supportive learning environment.

9. High levels of parent and community involvement.

Each of these nine characteristics is explained in more detail on the following page. For even more information, refer to the individual studies themselves (see the bibliography of the 20 studies). Other research has focused more narrowly on each of these nine areas and is consistent with the findings of the 20 studies (see the resource list). OSPI's website provides links to various studies and organizations that have conducted this type of research.

NINE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Research has shown that there is no silver bullet, no single thing that schools can do to ensure high student performance. Rather, high performing schools tend to have the following nine characteristics.

1. Clear and Shared Focus Everybody knows where they are going and why. The focus is on achieving a shared vision, and all understand their role in achieving the vision. The focus and vision are developed from common beliefs and values, creating a consistent direction for all involved.

2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students Teachers and staff believe that all students can learn and meet high standards. While recognizing that some students must overcome significant barriers, these obstacles are not seen as insurmountable. Students are offered an ambitious and rigorous course of study.

3. Effective School Leadership Effective instructional and administrative leadership is required to implement change processes. Effective leaders are proactive and seek help that is needed. They also nurture an instructional program and school culture conducive to learning and professional growth. Effective leaders can have different styles and roles—teachers and other staff, including those in the district office, often have a leadership role.

4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication There is strong teamwork among teachers across all grades and with other staff. Everybody is involved and connected to each other, including parents and members of the community, to identify problems and work on solutions.

5. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with Standards The planned and actual curriculum are aligned with the essential academic learning requirements (EALRs). Research-based teaching strategies and materials are used. Staff understand the role of classroom and state assessments, what the assessments measure, and how student work is evaluated.

6. Frequent Monitoring of Learning and Teaching A steady cycle of different assessments identify students who needs help. More support and instruction time is provided, either during the school day or outside normal school hours, to students who need more help. Teaching is adjusted based on frequent monitoring of student progress and needs. Assessment results are used to focus and improve instructional programs.

7. Focused Professional Development A strong emphasis is placed on training staff in areas of most need. Feedback from learning and teaching focuses extensive and ongoing professional development. The support is also aligned with the school or district vision and objectives.

8. Supportive Learning Environment The school has a safe, civil, healthy and intellectually stimulating learning environment. Students feel respected and connected with the staff and are engaged in learning. Instruction is personalized and small learning environments increase student contact with teachers.

9. High Level of Family and Community Involvement There is a sense that all have a responsibility to educate students, not just the teachers and staff in schools. Parents, businesses, social service agencies, and community colleges/universities all play a vital role in this effort.

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SCHOOL ASSESSMENT TOOL

High performing schools tend to have a combination of common characteristics. To help assess your school in these areas and facilitate the school improvement process, circle the number that best describes the extent to which each statement listed below is true in your school.

Characteristic	No Extent	Little Extent	Moderate Extent	Great Extent	Very Great Extent
1 All staff have a clear understanding of a common focus.	1	2	3	4	5
Staff share and believe in the same focus and vision.	1	2	3	4	5
2 Staff set high standards for all students.	1	2	3	4	5
Staff have high expectations for all students.	1	2	3	4	5
3 Leaders know what is needed and seek help when necessary.	1	2	3	4	5
Various staff assume different leadership roles.	1	2	3	4	5
4 Staff plan and work extensively with one another.	1	2	3	4	5
Staff communicate frequently about academic matters.	1	2	3	4	5
5 Curriculum and instruction are aligned with state standards.	1	2	3	4	5
Staff understand and use assessments to guide instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
6 Student progress is analyzed on a regular basis.	1	2	3	4	5
More support is provided to students who need help.	1	2	3	4	5
7 Professional development is focused in areas of most need.	1	2	3	4	5
Extensive and ongoing professional development is provided.	1	2	3	4	5
8 Students feel safe in a healthy learning environment.	1	2	3	4	5
Students feel respected and connected with teachers and staff.	1	2	3	4	5
9 Many families actively participate in school-related activities.	1	2	3	4	5
The community has many links to the school.	1	2	3	4	5

An analysis of the above statements can help determine the areas in which your school may want to concentrate its improvement efforts.